International Journal of Economic Practices and Theories (IJEPT)
ISSN: 2247-7225
Volume 2026, Issue 1

Rape Myths and Framing of Sexual Violence in Tamil Newspaper

N. Meena[1], Prof. S. Suba[2]

[1] Department of Women's Studies, Bharathidasan University, Khajamalai Campus, Tiruchirappalli -620020, Tamil Nadu, India

[1] Department of Women's Studies, Bharathidasan University, Khajamalai Campus, Tiruchirappalli -620020, Tamil Nadu, India

Abstract:

News media plays an important role in constructing public understandings and creating opinion on sexual violence through the selection, representation and framing. Although journalism can illustrate gender-based violence and demand accountability, its narratives may also reproduce rape myths by questioning victims' credibility, emphasizing their circumstances, minimizing perpetrators' responsibility or normalizing sexual aggression. This study examines the construction and reproduction of rape myths through representations of victims, perpetrators and the circumstances of rape, while critically analysing the language used to describe rape in Tamil-language news-related records. The study employs descriptive content analysis informed by rape-myth theory, media-framing theory and critical discourse analysis. The dataset comprises 186 records dated between January 2019 and December 2023, containing information on incident classifications, perpetrator–victim relationships, locations, victim status, news type and Tamil-language descriptions of rape. The study argues for a contextual approach that distinguishes descriptive information from victim-blaming, linguistic minimization and the displacement of responsibility. It proposes a theory-driven analytical framework for examining how news narratives construct sexual violence and its social meanings.

Keywords: rape myths, sexual violence, media framing, critical discourse analysis, Tamil news media, victim representation, perpetrator representation, linguistic framing, gender

1. Introduction

Media Plays a vital role to determine the tendency of human conditions. Among them, news media occupies a significant place to constructs the social understandings of Sexual violence through framing and reporting. Reporting of occurrences on the sexual violence and rape which shaped by the media has several meanings that naturally attached to it while reading them as news. News media does not merely inform the facts rather they select specific details, allocate prominence to specific actors, label events through culturally meaningful terminology and organise information into narratives that influence how audiences understand an incident. Through these processes, rape reporting can expose violence, challenge impunity and support survivors. It can also reproduce assumptions about gender, sexuality, victim credibility and appropriate feminine conduct.

In India, the conceptual understanding of rape and sexual violence has attached with honour and stigma rather than the rights of women. The news reporting also strengthened to keeps the existing values through admit the rape myths, using languages, framing the terms and representing the victims and perpetrators through narratives. Rape myths are an important perception for understanding these representational processes. Rape myths defined by Lonsway and Fitzgerald (1994) as it firm false beliefs that reject or justify sexual aggression.

Describing the term of sexual violence and use language is central to this process which can affect its perceived seriousness. the action assigned to perpetrators, the credibility ascribed to victims and the distinction between

[1] Department of Women's Studies, Bharathidasan University, Khajamalai Campus, Tiruchirappalli -620020, Tamil Nadu, India, E.Mail: meenapraba82@gmail.com
[2] Department of Women's Studies, Bharathidasan University, Khajamalai Campus, Tiruchirappalli -620020, Tamil Nadu, India, E.Mail: suba.s@bdu.ac.in

allegations, criminal acts and legal outcomes. In India, public consideration to sexual violence depiction sharply after the 2012 Delhi gang rape, which led to the Justice Verma Committee (2013) and the Criminal Law (Amendment) Act 2013. Legal reform, however, does not automatically change cultural scripts. Feminist scholars have long argued that the courtroom, the police station and the newspaper share a moral vocabulary in which a woman's sexual 'purity', movement and conduct are scrutinised more closely than the accused man's behaviour (Baxi, 2014; Menon, 2004; Sunder Rajan, 1993).

Tamil is a language of a major regional press with a distinctive moral lexicon. Terms such as *karpu* (chastity) are embedded in literary, religious and political traditions that tie female worth to sexual conduct (Geetha, 2002). Yet the vocabulary of Tamil crime reporting on sexual violence has received little systematic attention in the English-language literature on rape myths, which is dominated by Anglo-American and Australian studies (Easteal, Holland & Judd, 2015; Sutherland et al., 2015).

Further, this research article addresses that gap with two objectives:

1. To assess the construction and reproduction of rape myths in news items on sexual violence.
2. To critically analyses, from a gender perspective, the language and terms used to describe sexual violence.

However, the present study examines 186 news-related records dated between 2019 and 2023. It investigates the recorded representations of victims, perpetrators and the circumstances of rape, alongside the Tamil-language terms used to describe rape and related incidents. By integrating rape-myth theory with media framing and critical discourse analysis, the study develops an analytical basis for investigating whether reporting practices reproduce, challenge or remain ambiguous towards rape-supportive assumptions.

2. Review of Literature

2.1. Rape myths

The studies on rape myths has exposed that how the rape and sexual violence minimalize by the victim blaming and perpetrator excusing languages and socially determined beliefs. Rape myths defined by Burt (1980) as prejudicial, stereotyped or false beliefs about rape, its victims and its perpetrators. Rape myths redefined by the Lonsway and Fitzgerald (1994) as the attitudes and beliefs deny of sexual violence and it confine or justified against women. Payne, Lonsway and Fitzgerald (1999) identified recurring themes: *she asked for it*, *he didn't mean to*, *it wasn't really rape*, *she wanted it* and *she lied*. Meta-analytic and review evidence shows that acceptance of such myths is associated with victim blaming and with lenient judgements of perpetrators (Grubb & Turner, 2012; Suarez & Gadalla, 2010; Bohner et al., 2009).

2.2. Media Framings

Four functions of Framing conceptualise by Entman (1993), defining a problem, finding its roots, making moral evaluations and recommending remedies. In the context of rape reporting, those functions help establish whether an article identifies sexual violence as a violation of consent and bodily autonomy, identifies accountability appropriately, evaluations the behaviour tangled and presents institutional or social responses.

Benedict (1992) examined how the press represents sex crimes and how gender stereotypes influence public narratives about sexual violence. Her work demonstrates the value of investigating not only what news reports state but also how their representational conventions reproduce broader cultural assumptions.

2.3. Language, discourse and the social construction of rape

Critical discourse analysis studies how media produces and reproduces the social meanings within specific cultural context through languages. Fairlough (1995) discussions for analysing media discourse in terms of text and social practice. This method is closely relevant to the rape reporting, because framing terms and using language which reflects the cultural and contextual belief system rather than legally approved terms. It can assign agency, make credibility and shape the perceived relationship between an offence and its victim.

Nagar (2016) demonstrates the relevance of critical discourse analysis to Indian newspaper coverage of sexual violence. Her study connects linguistic choices and ideological assumptions with the sociocultural construction

of rape reporting. Language can frame sexual violence through several mechanisms: Agency, Credibility, specificity, sensationalism and responsibility. These apparatuses deliver an outline for critically analysing Tamil – language news reporting without pretentious that a particular word is intrinsically victim-blaming or minimizing.

3. Theoretical Framework

3.1. Rape – myth Theory

Brownmiller (1975) discussed that rape functions as the social instrument of control and later studies expanded the concept into the 'rape culture' in which sexual violence is normalised. Kelly's (1988), argument further developed how the everyday harassment to rape, which is why the minimisation of 'lesser' forms matters. Lonsway & Fitzgerald (1994), conceptualised the rape myth reinforce assumptions that excuse perpetrator's action and sexual aggression or question victims' credibility through representation of victims, perpetrators and Place of occurrences. In this strand, news id one of the channels underpin rape myths are the cognitive and linguistic outputs of rape culture.

3.2. Media – Framing theory

Entman's (1993), Framing theory defines framing as selecting process. In the selecting framework provides a systematic approach to analysing how a report constructs the meaning of the incidents as defined the problem, casual attribution, moral evaluation, remedy and response. Further, Christie's (1986) 'ideal victim' and Estrich's (1987) 'real rape' concepts strengthens the ideas. Ideal victim is weak, blameless, engaged in respectable activity and attacked by a stranger. 'Real rape' is attacked by a stranger. Tuchman (1978) described that gatekeeping and newsroom customs explain why they recur.

3.3. Feminist Discourse Analysis theory

Critical discourse analysis considers lexical choice, transitivity, description, portrayal and naming as an ideological practice (Fairclough, 1995; van Dijk, 1988). Fairclough (1995), examines the relationship between linguistic form, social meaning and power. Bourdieu (2001) conceptualise the symbolic violence. In added that feminist critical discourse analysis address retains a 'gender order' which means male dominance is naturalised. In this study describing rape in Tamil is the primary discursive component. Moralising terms, minimalizing vocabulary, euphemism and agents or complaint -centred naming are bring as a possible carrier of myths (Gill, 2007). However, the analysis should examine active and passive constructions, naming practices, attribution verbs, euphemisms, sensational terminology and distinctions between allegations and established legal findings.

3.4. Intersectionality

Intersectionality theory proposed by Crenshaw (1991) discussed that gender combines with further axes of authority. In the Indian setting, caste, class, religion and disability shape both vulnerability and the trustworthiness accorded to survivors (Chakravarti, 2003; Rege, 1998), and so the analysis attends to how victims' social positions are named.

4. Methodology

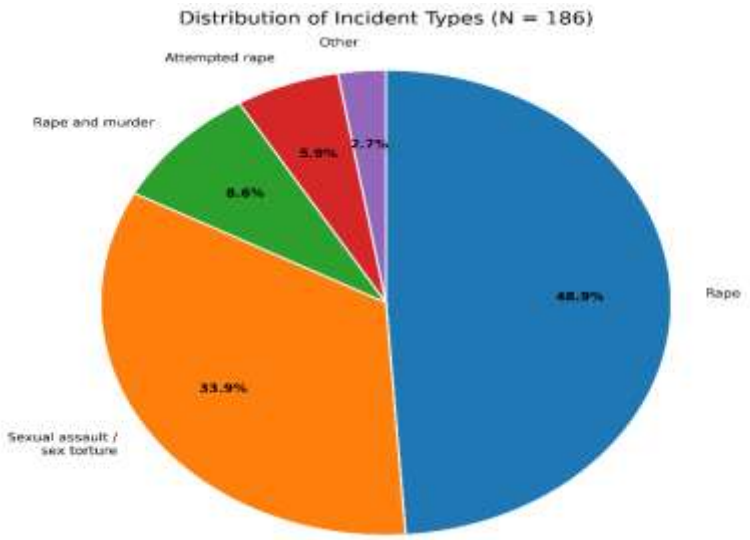
The study adopted a descriptive research design, employing both quantitative and qualitative content analysis informed by Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA). The quantitative component examined the distribution of the identified categories, while the qualitative component provided a theoretical framework for analysing the meanings constructed through news language.

The study selected news items published in Daily Thanthi, a Tamil-language vernacular newspaper, between January 2019 and December 2023. A stratified sampling method was employed to select news reports related to "Paliyal and Karpazhippu" (sexual violence and rape) over the five-year period. Initially, 800 news items were collected. After excluding duplicate or repeated reports and cases registered under the Protection of Children from Sexual Offences (POCSO) Act, 186 news items were taken for analysis. Following a careful reading of the collected reports, the final sample comprised news items specifically related to rape, gang rape, attempted rape,

and rape following a false promise. The selected news items were subsequently classified into relevant categories and analysed

5. Results and Discussions

5.1. Type of Incident (N= 186)



The chart presents the distribution of incident types identified in 186 news items. Rape accounted in the dominant category 91 (48.9%) representing nearly half of the sample. Following that the next predominant category was sexual assault/sex torture reported in 63 (33.9) news items. together, rape and sexual assault or sexual torture accounted for 154 items, representing 82.8% of the sample. This concentration demonstrates that the selected news coverage primarily focused on rape and related forms of sexual violence.

5.2. The vocabulary of sexual violence Tamil Description of offence

Descriptor (transliterated)	**Literal sense**	**N=**	**%=**
Paliyal thollai	sexual trouble / nuisance	56	30.1
Paliyal palathkaram	sexual force / compulsion	53	28.5
Karpazhippu	destruction of chastity	36	19.4
Paliyal puhar	sexual complaint	18	9.7
Paliyal vankodumai	sexual atrocity	7	3.8
Other (*seendal*, *silmisam*, *vivagaram*, *uravu*, *valakku*, obscene video, etc.)	various	16	8.6

The predominant descriptor was *Paliyal thollai* (sexual trouble or nuisance), accounting for 56 news items (30.1%). The term frames sexual violence as an act of anxiety rather than explicitly recognizing the severity of the offence. The second most common descriptor was *Paliyal palathkaram* (sexual force or compulsion), used in 53 news items (28.5%) and Paliyal Vankodumai (sexual atrocity) used in 7 (3.8%) news items. Compared with *Paliyal thollai*, both terms expression more explicitly conveys the use of force or coercion. Another term *Karpazhippu ('destruction of chastity')* mentioned in 36 news items (19.4%) which reflects a culturally rooted association between women's sexuality and chastity. The term *Paliyal puhar* appeared in 18 (9.7%) news items expressed that not confirming rape. The remaining Various terms as sendal, silmism, vivagaram, vuravu , valakku,

obsecene video which meant that not equivalent to rape. The table demonstrated that the descriptors in daily thanthi newspaper is not uniform.

5.3. Descriptions Change over time

Descriptor	2019 (n=54)	2020 (n=19)	2021 (n=21)	2022 (n=42)	2023 (n=50)
Karpazhippu	27.8	36.8	14.3	19.0	6.0
Palathkaram	20.4	31.6	33.3	31.0	32.0
Thollai	14.8	26.3	38.1	38.1	38.0
Puhar	24.1	0.0	0.0	4.8	6.0

The term *Paliyal Palathkaram* mentioned at least one third of the news items and the chastity-based term *karpazhippu* declined obviously, At the same time, minimalizing term *Paliyal thollai* more than doubled its share, from 14.8% to 38.0%. Six of the seven *vankodumai* items appear in 2023, which suggests the emergence of a more serious term in the most recent year.

5.4. Context: perpetrator, place and victim status

Dimension	Category	n	%
Perpetrator	Holds authority (employer, Higher official, police, professor, priest, politician, caste or communal power)	70	37.6
	Stranger	58	31.2
	Known person (friend, lover, neighbour, colleague, relative, driver, etc.)	57	30.6
Place	Private spaces (victim's home, perpetrator's place, other private Places)	78	41.9
	Institutions (college, police station, ashram and hospital)	29	15.6
	Workplace	23	12.4
	Public space (Train, Park, Railway station)	21	11.3
	Private transport (during travel by auto, taxi and cab)	17	9.1
	Other / not mentioned	18	9.7
Victim status	Alone / unaccompanied (loneliness, travelling alone at night, single woman)	59	31.7
	Power asymmetry (Powerless, helpless)	54	29.0
	Trust-related (deceived by trusting, with male friend, after sedative)	26	14.0
	Other identity or condition / not mentioned	47	25.3

A number of myths were countered by the circumstantial evidences. 68.3% of news items showed that the perpetrators are known persons to the victim or holding authority over her and 80.2% of individual rapes (77 of 96). Only 11.3% of incidents were in public space. 17 (9.1%) news items mentioned that the occurrence happened during the travel by private vehicles and committed by the drivers (unknown). Gang rape, by similarly, was strongly associated with strangers (33 of 55, 60.0%). Yet the victim-status variable shows a competing script. In 45.7% of items (n = 85) the victim was characterised by being alone, travelling at night, trusting or accompanying a man, or being sedated. 'Loneliness' alone was recorded in 50 items, and 70% of those involved a stranger perpetrator. *Puhar* descriptors were tangled to authority and hierarchy: 15 of 18 (83.3%) involved victims situated as subordinate, powerless or helpless.

In intersectional aspect, marked social identities were few but noteworthy. They included Dalit (n = 2), tribal (n = 1), transgender (n = 1), physically challenged (n = 2) and mentally challenged (n = 3) victims, and both Dalit cases involved 'upper-caste' perpetrators. Three items were framed with words meaning 'affair' or 'relationship' (*vivagaram*, *uravu*), including one coded as rape by a communal group and one coded as rape of a physically challenged woman.

6. Discussions

6.1. A vocabulary grading that minimises

The language provisions an incline from euphemism (*Paliyal thollai, silmisim, seendal*), through the standard term (*Paliyal Palathkaram*), to moralising (*karpazhippu*) and, rarely, severity – marking (*vankodumai*). The dominance of *thollai* is the main finding for Objective 2. A word meaning ‘trouble’ or ‘nuisance’ frames an act as a disturbance to the woman’s peace rather than a violation of her bodily autonomy. When it describes 87.3% of items that the coding classes as sexual assault or sex torture, the terminological gap between act and name realises the ‘it wasn’t really rape’ myth, and it fits Kelly’s (1988) warning that minimising ‘lesser’ abuse normalises the continuum.

6.2. Chastity, honour and the moral economy of the female body

Karpazhippu locates the destruction in the loss of *karpu (chastity)*, not in the violence done to the person. This is the vocabulary of Brownmiller's (1975) 'property' reading of rape and of Bourdieu's (2001) symbolic violence. That it appears in four of every five rape-and-murder items is telling, since the victim's death is narrated through the destruction of her purity. The decline of *karpazhippu* (27.8% to 6.0%) is encouraging and may reflect feminist critique and editorial reform, but the data cannot establish cause. The simultaneous rise of *thollai* indicates that part of the shift may be towards softer rather than more accurate language.

6.3. Victim status as implicit causal explanation

In Entman's (1993) terms, the victim-status variable captures the 'causal interpretation' embedded in reports. Loneliness, night travel, trusting a man and accompanying a male friend are presented as circumstances of the crime, yet in practice they operate as responsibilities, locating risk in women's conduct rather than in perpetrators' choices. This is consistent with the Indian argument that women's occupation of public space is framed as risk-taking (Phadke et al., 2011) and with Benedict's (1992) and Meyers's (1997) findings. The 'ideal victim' (Christie, 1986) is a woman who is accompanied, respectable and attacked by a stranger, and the stranger-led gang-rape items in the dataset fit that script most closely. Cases of deception and misplaced trust (14.0%) depart from it, and they are exactly the cases where blame by implication is likely.

7. Conclusion

This study found that rape myths in Tamil news coverage function less through unambiguous blame than through naming. Victim- status cues, chastity – based lexis, minimalizing descriptors, complaint -centred tags together reproduce the myths that sexual violence is inconsequential, that is tied with honour and women’s credibility, that women’s conduct invites it. The variation in descriptors provides an important basis for examining how Tamil print media constructs the meaning of sexual violence and whether its reporting language challenges or reproduces patriarchal norms, cultural values on rape and rape-related myths. At the same time, coverage increasingly records known and powerful perpetrators and private settings, and the decline of *karpazhippu* suggests that restructuring is possible.

References:

[1] Baxi, P. (2014). *Public secrets of law: Rape trials in India*. Oxford University Press.
[2] Benedict, H. (1992). *Virgin or vamp: How the press covers sex crimes*. Oxford University Press.
[3] Berns, N. (2004). *Framing the victim: Domestic violence, media, and social problems*. Aldine de Gruyter.
[4] Bohner, G., Eyssel, F., Pina, A., Siebler, F., & Viki, G. T. (2009). Rape myth acceptance: Cognitive, affective and behavioural effects of beliefs that blame the victim and exonerate the perpetrator. In M. Horvath & J. Brown (Eds.), *Rape: Challenging contemporary thinking* (pp. 17–45). Willan.

[5] Bourdieu, P. (2001). *Masculine domination*. Stanford University Press.
[6] Brownmiller, S. (1975). *Against our will: Men, women and rape*. Simon & Schuster.
[7] Buchwald, E., Fletcher, P. R., & Roth, M. (Eds.). (1993). *Transforming a rape culture*. Milkweed Editions.
[8] Burt, M. R. (1980). Cultural myths and supports for rape. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 38*(2), 217–230.
[9] Chakravarti, U. (2003). *Gendering caste through a feminist lens*. Stree.
[10] Christie, N. (1986). The ideal victim. In E. A. Fattah (Ed.), *From crime policy to victim policy* (pp. 17–30). Macmillan.
[11] Crenshaw, K. (1991). Mapping the margins: Intersectionality, identity politics, and violence against women of color. *Stanford Law Review, 43*(6), 1241–1299.
[12] Du Mont, J., Miller, K.-L., & Myhr, T. L. (2003). The role of 'real rape' and 'real victim' stereotypes in the police reporting practices of sexually assaulted women. *Violence Against Women, 9*(4), 466–486.
[13] Easteal, P., Holland, K., & Judd, K. (2015). Enduring themes and silences in media portrayals of violence against women. *Women's Studies International Forum, 48*, 103–113.
[14] Entman, R. M. (1993). Framing: Toward clarification of a fractured paradigm. *Journal of Communication, 43*(4), 51–58.
[15] Estrich, S. (1987). *Real rape*. Harvard University Press.
[16] Fairclough, N. (1995). *Media discourse*. Edward Arnold.
[17] Fowler, R. (1991). *Language in the news: Discourse and ideology in the press*. Routledge.
[18] Gavey, N. (2005). *Just sex? The cultural scaffolding of rape*. Routledge.
[19] Geetha, V. (2002). *Gender*. Stree.
[20] Gerbner, G., Gross, L., Morgan, M., & Signorielli, N. (1994). Growing up with television: The cultivation perspective. In J. Bryant & D. Zillmann (Eds.), *Media effects: Advances in theory and research* (pp. 17–41). Lawrence Erlbaum.
[21] Gill, R. (2007). *Gender and the media*. Polity Press.
[22] Grubb, A., & Turner, E. (2012). Attribution of blame in rape cases: A review of the impact of rape myth acceptance, gender role conformity and substance use on victim blaming. *Aggression and Violent Behavior, 17*(5), 443–452.
[23] Kapur, R., & Cossman, B. (1996). *Subversive sites: Feminist engagements with law in India*. Sage.
[24] Kelly, L. (1988). *Surviving sexual violence*. Polity Press.
[25] Kitzinger, J. (2004). *Framing abuse: Media influence and public understanding of sexual violence against children*. Pluto Press.
[26] Krippendorff, K. (2004). *Content analysis: An introduction to its methodology* (2nd ed.). Sage.
[27] Lazar, M. M. (2005). *Feminist critical discourse analysis: Gender, power and ideology in discourse*. Palgrave Macmillan.
[28] Lonsway, K. A., & Fitzgerald, L. F. (1994). Rape myths: In review. *Psychology of Women Quarterly, 18*(2), 133–164.
[29] Menon, N. (2004). *Recovering subversion: Feminist politics beyond the law*. Permanent Black.
[30] Meyers, M. (1997). *News coverage of violence against women: Engendering blame*. Sage.
[31] Payne, D. L., Lonsway, K. A., & Fitzgerald, L. F. (1999). Rape myth acceptance: Exploration of its structure and its measurement using the Illinois Rape Myth Acceptance Scale. *Journal of Research in Personality, 33*(1), 27–68.
[32] Phadke, S., Khan, S., & Ranade, S. (2011). *Why loiter? Women and risk on Mumbai streets*. Penguin Books India.
[33] Rege, S. (1998). Dalit women talk differently: A critique of 'difference' and towards a Dalit feminist standpoint position. *Economic and Political Weekly, 33*(44), WS39–WS46.
[34] Suarez, E., & Gadalla, T. M. (2010). Stop blaming the victim: A meta-analysis on rape myths. *Journal of Interpersonal Violence, 25*(11), 2010–2035.
[35] Sunder Rajan, R. (1993). *Real and imagined women: Gender, culture and postcolonialism*. Routledge.
[36] Sutherland, G., McCormack, A., Pirkis, J., Easteal, P., Holland, K., & Vaughan, C. (2015). *Media representations of violence against women and their children: State of knowledge paper*. ANROWS.

[37] Taylor, R. (2009). Slain and slandered: A content analysis of the portrayal of femicide in crime news. *Homicide Studies, 13*(1), 21–49.
[38] Tuchman, G. (1978). *Making news: A study in the construction of reality*. Free Press.
[39] van Dijk, T. A. (1988). *News as discourse*. Lawrence Erlbaum.
[40] Verma Committee. (2013). *Report of the Committee on Amendments to Criminal Law*. Government of India.